

AETC News Clips

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25 Oct 01

Expert gives views on state of homeland defense

July 11, 1999. I was deployed with a U.S. Army Reserve and National Guard Hurricane Mitch relief task force in Puerto Barrios, Guatemala. As a tropical depression dropped 13 inches of rain, an earthquake struck. Six point six on the Richter scale.

Army Reserve Col. Bill Gross, the task force commander, was a total pro. Within 15 minutes our unit was reorganized and operational. An hour later, Gross was advising the Guatemalan authorities on recovery efforts.

We couldn't have had a better man on the ground. Gross, as a civilian, is coordinator of Emergency Preparedness for city of Dallas. A Vietnam vet and Texas A&M civil engineer,



AUSTIN
BAY

Here are the highlights of a recent Q&A session I had with Gross:

Q: Homeland defense against terror attack. Are we prepared?

A: Locally and regionally

we've been working since passage of the Nunn-Lugar-Domenici, or NLD, Act in 1996. Despite Sept. 11, we're miles ahead of where we were before 1996, but we still have gaps and holes. NLD was designed to prepare first responders to deal with terrorist weapons of mass destruction, specifically chem and bio. The big issue is sharing intelligence. In Texas I think the FBI's gone out of its way to reach out to police and other responders. That's the right step. We need to integrate local state and national (intelligence) sources. Improve foreign intelligence, of course, but distribute the intelligence so law enforcement can act before an incident.

Q: What's your take on the effectiveness of biological and chemical terror weapons?

A: The threat's real, but it's technologically hard to launch an effective biological or chemical attack and get the kind of casualties you can cause with conventional explosives. But remember, the object is to terrify, and these weapons terrify.

Q: What do you, as a responder, want local and state leaders to do?

A: Heck, what national leadership needs to do, too. Clear guidance and reassurance in times of peril. Governors need to immediately outline the nature of the threat. Senior officials need to tell the people that implementing any response plan is harder if citizens lack confidence. Local leaders need

to support and equip their fire and police. Confident and competent local resources are crucial. Locals need to practice integrating their capabilities with state and federal assets. Though population centers are prime terror targets, in this war, even the small towns have a responsibility to be prepared.

Q: If citizens lack confidence, huh? What about media response to a terror attack or potential terror attack?

A: I think print media have been very responsible since Sept 11. I get the impression that some in the broadcast media are more interested in spreading gloom to garner ratings than quelling people's uneasiness, or giving solid facts. Editors must field reporters

who have done the background study and are not pushing the sensational element.

Q: A media-terrorized populace makes your job of saving lives that much harder?

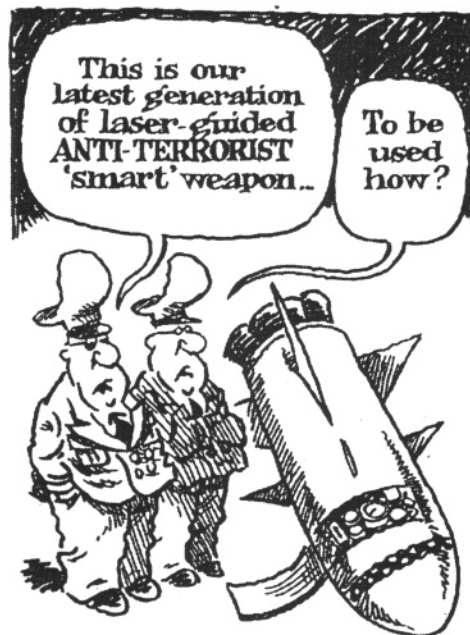
A: Every time someone in the media or around the office water cooler paints a fearful picture it feeds hysteria. If there is a chemical agent release that kills 100, to those 100 and their families it's a tragedy. If it is limited there, then that's one thing. If panic from the incident magnifies it, then the terrorists have won.

Austin Bay is an Austin writer who analyzes military, intelligence and regional issues. His column is syndicated by Creators' Syndicate.

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MILITARY PROFILE: SHANNON MEON

Shannon Meon's dream had always been to work for NASA. The only things that stood in the way where his father's hope for him to become a pharmacist and a prerequisite by NASA for him to have had some military training before even being considered for that line of work.

So a month before he graduated from high school, the Iowa native joined the United States Army under the Delayed Entry Program.

He knew his father would eventually understand that he had no intention of pursuing a pharmacy career. And he wanted to go ahead and get some military training under his belt.

But after settling into the Air Force, Meon decided he liked what he was doing. He gave up on his plans to work for NASA.

"There are few people in the world who love what they do, and I am one of them. I just love the job I do," he said.

"The Air Force has provided me a great home and allowed me to make a lot of great friends along the way," Meon said.

He is a staff sergeant who works as a logistics planner for the 42nd Air Base Wings. Meon, who is stationed at Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base, has been in the military for more than nine years.

He is married to Nicole Meon and has a 2-year-old daughter, Brianna.

—Kim Williams-Neil



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Montgomery Advertiser, 24 Oct. 01, 2C